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Forms, Manifestations, and Characteristics of Urban Crime

Increasing urbanization in developing nations brings an increase in crime and a shift in crime patterns. This article discusses urbanization and crime in Latin America.

By Marcela Márquez de Villalobos

Introduction

The growth of urban crime, shared by socialist and capitalist countries alike, has so far escaped definitive explanation. This crime boom is even beginning to affect rural areas, although its impact is felt with more intensity in large cities, where dwellings and people are subject to heavy population concentrations and scarcity of space; other common elements of urban environments are infrequent personal relations as well as the superficial and impersonal quality of communication. This impersonal atmosphere fosters tolerance of and indifference to strange and unusual occurrences, as contrasted to rural areas, where people are involved in other people's lives and where deviant and immoral behavior cannot escape notice, much less be tolerated. Furthermore, in rural areas communities are closely knit and people feel more secure.

Crimes committed in urban areas can be either individual or collective. In describing the manifestations of urban crime, this report will try to examine offenders (adult, male and female, juvenile) and offenses which constitute urban delinquency and the degree of violence used in the commission of certain crimes which are not registered statistically.

Forms of Urban Crime

Throughout history, men have experienced inner conflicts between the principles of good and evil. Law-abiding citizens are not immune to temptations to break the law, while criminals sometimes experience strong impulses to obey the law. In examining various forms of deviant behaivor it must be kept in mind that, between behavior extremes, there are intermediate zones of actual conformity with the law accompanied by secret yearnings to break it, as well as seemingly law-abiding behavior accompanied by secret lawbreaking.

Individual crime. Traditional criminal behavior has been explained by

- Endogenous factors (e.g., temperament, level of intelligence)
- Exogenous factors (e.g., socioeconomic conditions, culture)
- Contact with hardened criminals
- Lack of exposure to models of noncriminal behavior.

The above factors influence the individual's conduct and daily life through the mechanisms of imitation, learning, and education. Moreover, city dwellers are exposed to highly visible symbols of material wealth, which they are inspired to acquire regardless of the means employed. Also, an ongoing struggle for survival between old, traditional values and new, changing values breeds uncertainty and instability. Prominent authors note that, throughout history, societies with more individual freedoms and human rights show a higher incidence of deviant behavior. Comparison with crime rates in the historic past is hindered, however, by the unreliability of crime data; now, more crimes are reported and solved by improved police methods, and a more vocal public demands that crime be eliminated.

Formas, manifestaciones, y características de la delincuencia urbana (NCJ 61723), 1978. (Institute for Criminology, University of Panama) Translated from the Spanish by Louciana Rose.

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Different types of communities, like different types of individuals, are more prone to certain types of crime. In general, crimes against property, against persons, against morals, and against the institution of the family are common to all societies, developed and developing. A precise correlation between population growth and an increase in the number of crimes is cited by many, but has not yet been proven conclusively. Undoubtedly, there are correlations between crime and industrialization, farm-to-city migrations, urbanization, the desperate struggle for economic survival, and social disorganization fostered by the breakdown of basic moral values, all of which are etiological factors in the increase of serious crime.

Collective crime. The dynamics of group behavior indicate that close proximity to large numbers of other people with similar objectives and codes of behavior stimulates many individuals, speeds up their thought processes, loosens their tongues and their inhibitions, and favors the release of muscular energy. Collective crime is a form of group behavior that can be organized and nonorganized.

(a) Organized collective crime. Some crime organizations are highly complex, operating on a large scale to pursue their objectives by acquiring wealth in admitted defiance of the law. Their criminal methods include blackmail or physical or moral violence. Such groups include adult professionals, who specialize in various branches of crimes. They usually graduate from juvenile gangs and maintain a strict hierarchical structure, with rigid lines drawn between superiors and subordinates; group cohesion is strong. Although competition between organized crime groups exists, these organized crime groups are mutually defensive, rather than aggressive, in nature. Efficiency of operation and practicality are the rule; personal relations are unimportant, and only the "work" assigned to each member of the group and the "division of labor" are emphasized.

The syndicate is a more sophisticated operation than other organized crime groups: its members are only "employees" and are not entitled to share the profits of their employer. Links and hierarchical structure are unknown to the members, thereby making defections and betrayals very difficult even if fear of execution did not keep members in line. Members receive their orders from intermediaries and are only cogs in a crime machine programmed to produce certain results.

(b) Nonorganized collective crime. Nonorganized collective crime includes groups formed without any clear-cut responsibility or leadership to achieve certain short-term ends. The members of nonorganized criminal groups are bound by a kind of camaraderie and a certain heterogeneity, galvanized into action by forces which would have remained dormant in isolated individuals. Among such groups are mobs, which usually form suddenly and without premeditation to achieve objectives perceived or formulated on the spur of the moment. Their leadership is transitory and improvised. Under certain conditions, mobs appear animated by a collective soul and act like a single organism, which can be extremely dangerous because all its members are infected with a sort of intoxication conducive to irresponsible violence.

Manifestations of Urban Crime

The breaking of some specific law is common to all types of criminal behavior; therefore, criminal laws are the formal causes of criminal behavior. Without laws forbidding it, crime would automatically disappear—there is no such thing as crime per se (natural crime). Its criminal nature is imposed upon it from above, by individuals or groups in power. For example, crimes against property, whose incidence leads crime statistics everywhere, are not perceived in the same way in all cultures and societies, but are defined by certain vested interests. The norms of social control (laws) do not evolve simultaneously with social values. Since there is no absolutely criminal conduct, no individual can be labeled as a criminal. There are only social attitudes and reactions to conduct regarded as deviant within determined social contexts. There are no born criminals with definite biological traits of inferiority.

Environment is, therefore, a key factor in the emergence of crime. Heavy population density, economic complexities, poverty, accessibility of drugs, gambling, and prostitution contribute to urban crime. Deviance depends on whether an individual adapts, or fails to adapt, to a specific social context by assimilating its norms. Robert Merton, the sociologist, lists five types of reaction by individuals to their social environment: (1) conformity; (2) innovation, which involves the introduction of new ways of achieving traditional objectives; (3) ritualism, which applies to constantly frustrated individuals who passively accept group values as rituals; (4) abandonment of societal values (alcoholics, habitual offenders, vagrants, etc.), and (5) rebellion, or active rejection of all established values and objectives. The heterogeneity or urban populations promotes diversity of criminal acts. The anonymity in which city dwellers live (contrasted with the familiarity and personal relations of small rural communities) keeps much criminal activity undetected and allows criminals to disappear easily. Criminal activity also promises greater pecuniary returns than other forms of livelihood, and the cities provide a school for learning deviant behavior.

Among the types of delinquents encountered in cities are "gutter rats," pickpockets thus named for their ability to disappear after committing a crime; thieves who break and enter into large houses, jewelry stores, banks, etc.; blackmailers, embezzlers, forgers, and con artists; safecrackers; and automobile thieves. Big cities also have areas of commercial crime, such as illegal gambling houses, taverns where one can eat and drink to excess, and houses of prostitution.

Large cities favor juvenile delinquency, offering young people easy access to unlawful pleasures that they cannot resist because their families have no strong moral values; at the same time, peer group pressures push them toward crime. Juvenile delinquency is increasing in developing countries out of all proportion to the actual demographic situation, and youngsters are initiated into crime at an increasingly early age. Juveniles usually start their criminal careers by committing petty theft on an individual basis, then progress to other types of crimes against property, ganging up with peer groups. Gang members share criminal methods and attitudes. Youngsters learn this type of behavior by imitating their friends in an effort to solve their adjustment problems in forms compatible with the reference group to which they belong.

Compatibility is basically achieved in three different ways. First, all types of societies offer adequate solutions for the majority of the problems encountered by their members, solutions which reduce tensions and which become institutionalized through a system of shared values. This conformity represents a form of adjustment achieved by promoting a certain amount of tolerance of unavoidable frustrations—for instance, by the mechanism of reduced aspirations. Second, when individuals are not satisfied with the institutionalized solutions offered by one group, they seek other, more adequate solutions in some other group. This constant exchange among groups represents "social metabolism," a phenomenon that occurs in all large social systems. Third, when a sufficient number of individuals share similar problems for which there are no adequate institutionalized solutions, they form subcultures in which a large number of "actors" favor mutual association, communication, and ties of sympathy and solidarity. Thus a new culture emerges that has been collectively developed and designed in response to the common needs, problems, and circumstances of its members. Juvenile delinquents often solve their problems of adapting to society by seeking shelter in youth subcultures, where they become totally alienated from the mainstream of society.

Characteristics of Urban Crime

Qualitative and quantitative analyses of urban crime are indispensable tools for formulating effective crime prevention programs and crime control policies flexible enough to keep pace with the rate of the country's development. In evaluating urban crime it must be remembered that statistics do not reflect all crimes committed, but only visible crimes, i.e., crimes that were actually discovered, reported to the police, investigated, and tried in court (a small percentage of the actual crimes).

All metropolitan areas are characterized by many violent acts that are not reflected in any crime statistics. These include both institutionalized violence and more highly diversified social and political violence. Institutionalized violence is the result of repressive measures taken by legal institutions against suspects (torture) or against inmates of correctional institutions (physical abuse). Social and political violence are the expression of dissatisfaction with existing social and economic conditions. For example, political assassination, which occurs in the course of a revolution or a coup d'etat, is especially frequent in Latin America where, between 1906 and 1967, the following assassinations of prominent political figures occurred:

Costa Rica	2
Guatemala	5
Honduras	2
Nicaragua	5
Panama	1

Other forms of political violence include terrorist acts and urban guerrilla warfare, for which no reliable statistics exist, and aircraft hijacking, which are performed to extort money for political extremist groups. These acts endanger human lives and cause serious dilemmas in the countries where they occur. Kidnapping for ransom is gradually replacing the more difficult aircraft hijacking as a form of political blackmail.

Some forms of urban crime are hard to measure because no specific provisions for them exist in criminal law. Among these complex, new types of criminal behavior are the corruption of public officials and white-collar crime. The corruption of public officials is a crime endemic and traditional to Latin America. Bureaucrats and politicians are offered bribes in exchange for favors or for protection of illegal gambling and prostitution establishments. White-collar crime involves such operations as manipulation of stocks, traffic in foreign currencies, bribery of public officials, and tax evasion.

Conclusions

Man is the only rational animal that can and does commit crimes. The criminal act is conditioned, in part, by cultural heredity and by other influences of the environment in which an individual acts. Therefore, all types of behavior that deviate from the norm either in a positive or in a negative form must be considered in the context of their environment.

The following important conclusions can be drawn from this analysis.

- Crime is on the increase all over the world, for reasons which are not yet entirely clear.
- Urban crime is varied and ranges from extreme to intermediate types of behavior. (Intermediate refers to a criminal act that is committed in secret.)
- Criminogenic factors can be endogenous or exogenous: relationships with other criminals and a lack of any relationship with models of

noncriminal behavior mold the daily behavior of individuals through the mechanisms of imitation, apprenticeship, and training.

- In more liberated and permissive societies there are more types of deviant behavior, whether these are criminal or noncriminal.
- The correlation between population increase and increases in crime rates is not always significant.
- Certain types of criminal behavior, such as gang crime, organized crime, and mob crimes, are typical of large metropolitan areas.
- Urban life, with its heterogeneity of population and anonymity, favors the occurrence of crime more than life in small communities.
- Lack of healthy recreational outlets for both young people and adults drives them to seek unlawful pleasures, since recreation is a normal human need that must be satisfied.
- Criminal codes are themselves the cause of crime because there is no such thing as a "natural" crime; the definitions of criminal acts come from the established powers.
- Negative social reaction to deviant behavior stigmatizes the deviant individual and identifies him with his crime.
- Urban crime can include violent crimes (or types of violent behavior) not reflected in statistics and unconventional types of crime that appear to be in full compliance with the law.
- Criminological policies must be based on identifying actual causes of crime; crime indexes offer no causal explanations of the phenomenon of crime.

Human behavior is not a purely individual phenomenon, but, rather, a sociopolitical fact. As such, it goes beyond the limits of the human personality which, to many, appears as the axis of human delinquency.

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